WORTH

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Abstract

Worth is a short narrative film set in an unidentified Pakistani village with Urdu dialogue. It follows a poor widower who -- due to an impending threat to his and his family's lives, which has already resulted in the murder of his wife -- decides to sell his infant son and use the money to escape with his young daughter. But just minutes before their scheduled departure, he insists on seeing the adoptive mother as he confronts a sudden change of heart.

The screenplay for *Worth* was distilled from an early draft of a feature screenplay I had written nearly a year beforehand. Considering that the longer script was intended as a first feature, and that the story was set in a very specific location, I decided to test the story, its characters and production by creating a proof-of-concept that could simultaneously serve as a standalone short film.

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I would also like to thank the faculty, staff and my fellow classmates at York University's film department, especially Kuowei Lee, whose encouragement and guidance facilitated the realization of my project.

Worth would not have been possible without the commitment, dedication and loyalty of its cast, crew and collaborators, all of whom sacrificed so much of their time and energy for its realization.

And finally, an immense thank you to my family for always being there.

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Backstory and Inspiration

My decision to pursue an MFA degree in film production at York University was mainly to develop my narrative/fiction filmmaking skills. (During my BFA studies, I focused predominantly on experimental work). I wanted to exit the program with a solid piece of fiction -- less concerned with experimenting with form, and more interested in writing a coherent short script and efficiently articulating it on screen.

I started the program having just finished a first draft of my first feature screenplay. My initial idea for a thesis project -- which is what I pitched in my application -- was to distill a segment of the feature script into a short film. The result would be a stand-alone short film that could simultaneously serve as a proof-of-concept to the feature.

The practical complications of the feature script, however -- set in Iran and Afghanistan with Farsi and Dari dialogue -- intimidated me into considering more feasible thesis ideas that I could conveniently produce locally in Toronto. I had to decide between the two paths quickly as I didn't want to stall the process. Friends, colleagues and professors urged me to tackle a proof-of-concept short due to its potential benefits, but considering my extremely narrow budget and lack of resources, I worried I would finish the program with a mess of a film that would be counterproductive to the ultimate cause. Eventually, however, in the absence of an appealing alternative (and wanting to at least *attempt* to reap the potential benefits of making a

proof-of-concept and to obtain a flavour for a story that I had been entertaining for a while) I decided to take the plunge and pursue my initial plan.

My overall objective with this thesis short was consistent with that of the feature, as well as with my approach to filmmaking as a whole: to tell a compelling narrative through efficient employment of the cinematic medium and syntax. Of the filmmakers I know, my views on the role and purpose of cinema most strongly correspond to the philosophies of Alfred Hitchcock. Considering cinema as a mass medium, I agree with Hitchcock that it is fundamental that a filmmaker seriously take the spectator into account by "[designing their] film just as Shakespeare did his plays -- for an audience."[1] In the introduction to his transcribed interviews with Hitchcock, Francois Truffaut argues that the greatness to Hitchcock's cinema comes from a "determination to compel the audience's uninterrupted attention, to create and then to keep up the emotion [and] sustain the tension throughout".[2] It is not merely enough to document reality as is and put it on screen without infusing it with drama. By asking, "What is drama, after all, but life with the dull bits cut out?"[3] Hitchcock implies that ideas are best communicated if the viewers are being engaged. In reference to Hitchock and his approach to cinema, Truffaut elaborates that it is precisely through this "art of involving the audience" that we transform them into "a participant in the film."[4]

[1] Truffaut, Francois, *Hitchcock/Truffaut*, (New York, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 214.
[2] Ibid., 10.
[3] Ibid., 71.
[4] Ibid., 11.

Believability is the filmmaker's primary concern. Even if the narrative were set in a fictitious world, the characters and plot must adhere to the logic and physics of the space in which the story takes place with clarity to prevent confusion. My intention with *Worth* was a realist portrayal of a realistic subject matter, but one which would also exercise dramatic/cinematic licence to elevate the drama. Hyper-realist films, most notably the Dardenne brothers' *L'Enfant* (2005) and Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007), served as helpful formal references, but I was aware that my inclinations and strengths lay with a more palpable cinematic language. While I enjoy, admire and believe there is great value in the portrayal of extreme realism in filmmaking, I find that this approach in many cases overlooks storytelling tools that are unique to cinema. Oftentimes the pieces rely too heavily on wide angles and dialogue -- which may yield spectacular acting and can be excellent for certain segments, but come at the expense of visual storytelling. Ken Loach's *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006), Cristi Puiu's *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu (2005),* and Abbas Kiarostami's *Certified Copy* (2010), are, I find, films that capture the action from such a distance that they fail to inject the audience with substantial emotion and can feel like a denial of the craft. No matter how authentic the acting, the drama does not register on screen to the maximum capacity. Elia Kazan, the great 'actor's director', realized early in his filmmaking career that he was "not making films, [but] photographing plays", and so pushed himself to "to start using the camera to tell the story".[5] Krzysztof Kieślowski, Billy Wilder, John Ford, Michael Haneke and David Lean are for me directors who, in their very own distinct ways, epitomize the ability to sustain the realism of their subject matter while employing a strong cinematic vocabulary. The final product is a well-rounded 'movie'.

[5]Cornfield, Robert ed., *Kazan on Directing* (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 154.

In the words of Hitchcock, to keep the camera "inside the action"[6] and the frame "charged with emotion"[7], I would shoot the film almost exclusively hand-held and favour predominantly mediums and close-ups. Non-diegetic audio would be entirely avoided to place emphasis on the visual storytelling and acting without relying on music as a crutch to enhance a scene's emotions -- and keep the style as raw and visceral as the plot. To preserve the story's believability, the dialogue and acting would need to be as truthful to the represented world as possible, which meant having the dialogue in the original language and all actors native speakers of it.

As far as the film's subject matter, I have never personally faced the challenges that the film's protagonist faces. Yet with age, I have become more mindful of the sacrifices parents make for the benefit of their children. What most interested me about parental sacrifice is the irony that they're performed in the interest of the child, yet that same positive intention comes at a heavy emotional cost for the parent, all while attempting to shield their children from any physical and emotional distress. Only in the parent-child dynamic do we see someone willingly inflict such intense emotional pain on themselves for the benefit of another. Within immigrant families, such as mine -- due to the countless hurdles endured in order to reach a desired status -- the frequency and intensity of these sacrifices and ensuing dilemmas are frequently even higher. This emotional strain and manifestation of vulnerability, also exposes the fallibility of parents to their children at younger ages, which (at least based on my experience), can lead to them to question whether they are fit for parenthood. All this became a core aspect of the theme I decided to explore.

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[6] Truffaut, Francois, *Hitchcock/Truffaut*, (New York, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 40.
[7] Ibid., 43.

By tackling the theme through the emotional point-of-view of the parent, rather than the child, the trajectory of the film would have the audience empathize with parental responsibility. The alternative emotional point-of-view placed on the child would essentially have been a coming-of-age tale, which reduces the emotional torment of the parent since it takes the child's moment of growth as its focal point.

In order for the subject to resonate with greater intensity, it made sense to set the narrative in a context where the stakes would be much higher. As Syd Field claims: "All conflict is drama. Without conflict, you have no action; without action, you have no character; without character, you have no story; and without story, you have no screenplay."[8] Greater drama can arise from moments of more intense emotional and personal distress, which, in the context of a fictionalized narrative, can become the impetus for internal change in the protagonist. Here, I was keen to raise the stakes to a point where a parent would undergo a change after being forced to consider the unthinkable. So I needed an appropriate setting for this plot to unfold. My fear, however, with both the short and the feature was that I would drift too far into unknown territory and end up with a film that was both shallow and insulting to the world where it takes place. How convincingly can I -- a childless, unmarried, 30-year-old with first-world privileges -- tackle something so removed from my reality? Could I convincingly and suspensefully immerse the audience in a moral dilemma between two ideas that are both well-intentioned (giving up a child for his safety, or keeping the family together) without it feeling obvious and foolish?

[8] Field, Syd, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (New York, New York: Delta Trade Paperback, 2005), 25.

Shaping the Script

Already having had a concrete source material to work from -- the feature script -- facilitated the screenwriting phase, but that's not to say it came without complications. The first step was to select the segment from the feature script that would translate effectively into a short. The intention was never to cram an entire feature into a short, but rather to strategically rework a significant nugget or distillation of the story that would convey both the narrative and thematic essence of its source material, as well as serve as a good introduction to its lead characters. After exploring several possibilities, I concluded that roughly the first 20 pages of the feature script -- the setup and inciting incident -- could do just that. Additionally, basing the short on the opening segment of the initial feature could "pitch" the idea better, as far as the proof-of-concept was concerned, and leave the audience wanting more.

Those opening 20-pages of the feature version were quite consistent with the plot of *Worth*, but with two main exceptions. Considering how one of the primary arcs of the feature script is the growth in relationship between Hamid (the father) and Darya (the daughter), the interactions between them is a bit more nuanced in the feature version in order to establish the schism that exists between them. In the context of a short, where the narrative is more concerned with one idea and one event, I decided to place the fractured father-daughter relationship in the background and emphasize the giving away of the baby. The second, and more prominent difference was that in the feature version Hamid never intends to sell Ali (the baby). Hamid goes to the Khan to solicit the services of Mahnaz (the woman) with the understanding that she will

carry his baby across the border for him, where they would be reunited. The overall exchange in the short unfolds quite similarly, except that in the former Hamid's conflict is relinquishing his child for good; in the latter there is the strong possibility that his baby might be stolen from him should Mahnaz and the Khan exploit the deal. In both cases, it is the guaranteed well-being of his child that's the central conflict of the scene.

The issue with the feature's plotline is that the pay-off comes much later in the story -- around 30 pages in -- where its resolution serves as the conclusion to the first act. A pay-off or culmination of Act One can come this late in the traditional three-act feature screenplay, but not in a short. By merely substituting the act of "lending" with "selling", I gained a much faster pay-off and was able to establish the characters and their world, present the confrontation, and resolve it in just over 10 pages. The selling and purchasing of an item is a permanent transaction with immediate implications. So long as the motive behind a parent wanting to sell off his child is firmly established and conveyed, any audience can quickly understand the gravity of the protagonist's dilemma. With those amendments implemented, I had the premise established, but still lacked the appropriate ending.

People frequently drew comparisons between my project and *Sophie's Choice* (1982), although I've always maintained that they are quite different. In *Sophie's Choice,* the mother is *coerced* to sacrifice one of her kids, knowing that the one she hands over will be killed -- posing the question of whether a parent can have favourites between her children. In the case of my story, however, Hamid personally and consciously makes the decision to give up his child, and does so

with the hope and optimism of assuring the child's wellbeing. Additionally, the two children in *Sophie's Choice* are of similar ages, while a much wider age gap exists between Darya (the daughter) and Ali (the infant son). From my own perspective, which was quickly solidified after consulting several other parents, just about any father or mother in Hamid's shoes would logically give up the baby over the 10 year-old. First off, it would be far more complicated to separate from a child with whom a parent has already forged a 10 year bond, which is not to suggest that parents love their elder children more than the younger ones, but a more extended history between two people is more difficult to reverse than one that has lasted merely months. Second, by giving up an infant who has so far not acquired the mental capacity to remember, you spare them the trauma of separation. The child will have absolutely no recollection of either his actual parents or the moment in which he was handed over. Giving up Darya suggests irreversible trauma for both her and her father, while giving up Ali means the emotional distress falls on Hamid's shoulders alone.

The decision to have Hamid's 10 year-old child a girl and his infant a boy came purely from narrative impulse, although it simultaneously conveyed an important, yet subtle, character trait. Elaneh Rostami-Povey provides ample evidence that the practice of exchanging females, particularly little girls and young women, to secure food or cash, settle feuds, or repay debts continues to be prevalent in Afghanistan.[9] Especially considering how Hamid has a life-threatening feud to settle, the fact that he has kept his daughter, who is at an optimal age for such an exchange, and decided to sacrifice his son -- and not to the party threatening him, but to

[9] Rostami-Povey, Elaheh, *Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion* (London, UK & New York, New York: Zeb Books, 2007), 18.

a surrogate parent -- could suggest he is purely relying on the practical codes of parenthood to guarantee the best outcome for his family, as opposed to succumbing to cultural practices.

With the overall plot and character dynamic already in place, the majority of the screenplay rewrites concerned the ending. In the initial draft, after giving up his child, Hamid returns to pick up Darya and induce her into going for a ride in his friend's truck. In this version, the pickup location is outside where Hamid had asked Darya to wait. Throughout the process of persuading her, Darya would grow overly suspicious of her father and eventually run away from him once he became more insistent with her. The script would end just as Hamid frantically must decide between chasing Darya or getting on the truck that's taking off.

As Tereza Barta (thesis supervisor) stressed, the primary issue with that ending was that the protagonist was falling victim to an incident that happens *to* him, as opposed to himself actively making a decision that reflects his internal growth. In order for the character to grow and change throughout the course of the story, and for the narrative's theme to resonate, the protagonist needs to consciously make a decision and execute it at the height of the narrative. The change in the character is the story's main source of drama, as the story is about an event that forces a character to undergo an inner growth. The protagonist's decision during the climax thus becomes the portal through which the filmmaker expresses the intended theme as well as his/her view on the subject matter.

Showing a father sell his infant without later confronting what he does as a consequence of his initial action fails to present any change in the character and does not voice a point of view. Even if we were to extend the ending to confirm whether he chases the daughter or abandons her for the ride, we would still fail to tackle the theme in a way that's truthfully expressive of anybody's deeper position on the subject matter. More importantly, such an ending wouldn't even directly address the central conflict around which the narrative revolves.

Tereza reasoned that Hamid should eventually undergo a change of heart, his father instincts kicking in, and return for his baby. The act of not wanting to separate from his child, despite the perils that surround them, best echoes the theme that there is no greater fear that a parent has for his/her child than that of being separated from it. External factors could indirectly sway his decision-making. But in order for a legitimate, permanent change to manifest within the protagonist, in order for the audience to be convinced that it's his decision and his alone, it would need to arise internally.

Tereza also suggested that, at the very end, we confirm that Hamid does successfully retrieve his son. I personally felt that extra note wrapped up the story a bit too nicely. What mattered narratively, that which indicates the change in character, was Hamid's decision to forgo the ride. Whether he succeeds in reclaiming his child can be left to the audience's imagination since that segment no longer addresses his growth. Nevertheless, I included such a scene in the script with the plan to decide whether to keep or omit it during the picture-edit. It was scripted as such:

EXT. ABANDONED BUILDING - NIGHT

A branch is tossed into a small campfire.

Darya huddles up to Hamid on the ground.

HAMID
Shhh... He just fell asleep.

Hamid looks down at the Baby sleeping in its arms.

He stretches an arm around Darya's shoulder. The three of them sit bundled together in front of the fire.

FADE TO BLACK.

Where to Film?

Planning the production became a far more complicated process than I had ever anticipated, mainly since it was never my initial plan to film it in Pakistan.

From the start, I had intentionally restricted the plot to mainly interior scenes to facilitate the possibility of it being filmed in Canada. With the exception of the pickup scene near the end, I didn't imagine it to be overly complicated. The backup plan was to shoot it near the eastern border of Iran where the architecture and landscape resemble that of Afghanistan. Considering that Iran is home to three-million Afghan refugees and migrants,[10] finding Afghan actors would not be an impossibility. Iranian cinema, especially over the past three decades, has developed what can be considered a fairly solid tradition of producing films in Afghanistan or about Afghans living in Iran. Majid Majidi's *Baran* (2001), Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *The Cyclist* (1987) and *Qandahar* (2001), Samira Makhmalbaf's *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003) and Jamshid Mahmoudi's *A Few Cubic Meters of Love* (2014) are just a few widely known examples.

As I delved deeper into the particularities of producing the script, I became more convinced that filming in Canada would not satisfy my vision. The two worlds are too visually and culturally distant; it would be too artificial. In no way would today's audiences, accustomed to a daily barrage of images from every corner of the world, suspend their disbelief to that extent. At best, the film could serve as a useful exercise in directing actors. Only with a hefty budget could one

[10] "Afghanistan unconcerned with Iranian threat to expel Afghans, official says," *The National*, May 13, 2019, https://www.thenational.ae/world/asia/afghanistan-unconcerned-with-iranian-threat-to-expel-afghans-official-says-1.860897

possibly cheat Canada for Afghanistan. Conversations with various Toronto production designers -- all of whom urged me to shoot it on location -- allowed me to conclude that a minimum of $20,000(CAD) would be needed on just set design in order to bring the piece to light properly. That was more than double my entire budget. Embracing Toronto's own environmental and architectural aesthetic implied a post-apocalyptic science fiction piece that I had no interest in. Such a piece would also require a lot more on-screen time to establish its fictitious setting and justify the perils from which the characters intend to flee.

Simultaneously, the possibility of filming it Iran was met with a massive roadblock. Due to the fact that I am still not exempt from military service in Iran, re-entering the country meant conscription. The temporary entrance visa for Iranians residing abroad was no longer offered, and graduate students don't qualify for student exemptions.

With Iran no longer a possibility and Canada being neither creatively nor financially practical, I had to decide whether to produce the piece in an alternative country or abandon the project altogether. For two months straight I desperately studied every feasible possibility of where and how I could film this piece with my limited budget and resources, and yet remain true to the integrity of the story and the key notion of authenticity.

Three countries presented themselves as candidates, and I spoke with every contact I could muster to examine their feasibility. Afghanistan, as the country in which the story is set, made logical sense. Tajikistan, geographically, culturally and linguistically close to Persian (and by

extension, Afghan) culture, was a second option. In fact, Shahrbanoo Sadat's *Wolf and Sheep* (2016) served as a recent example of an Afghan narrative shot in Tajikistan. Pakistan, also home to an enormous Afghan community that shares extensive cultural similarities with Afghanistan, especially through its own Pashto community, was the third.

Unlike Iran, however, neither of these three countries have much of a cinematic infrastructure. Tajikistan was quickly removed from the list as I couldn't manage a single contact on the ground. The viability of none the sources in Afghanistan could be verified and it proved quite costly. Moreover, 2018 became the deadliest year in Afghanistan in a decade.[11] Pakistan, on the other hand, emerged as a worthy contender, mainly by virtue of Shehrezade Mian, who initially pitched the idea to me.

Shehrezade and I met during our time at the BFA film production program. Of Pakistani origin, she was quite connected to Islamabad's small but intimate production scene. Through her networks I was able to slowly -- very slowly and with incredible difficulty -- navigate pre and post-production by finding key crew, sourcing equipment, scouting locations, etc.

I engaged with Shehrezade's contacts to get a feel for how feasible and costly production in Islamabad would be. Lahore and Karachi, both massive metropolises, are respectively Pakistan's cultural and financial hubs. Any production that occurs in Pakistan takes place in one of those two cities, while Islamabad is a relatively small city for politicians and retirees. But what I had in

[11] Zucchino, David, "Amid Afghan Peace Talks, U.N. Reports Record Civilian Deaths in 2018," *The New York Times*, February 24, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/24/world/asia/afghanistan-civilian-casualties.html

Islamabad -- contacts -- I lacked in Karachi and Lahore. In fact, Islamabad's small environment could be easier to navigate for a foreigner wanting to produce a short with limited resources in a country he's never been to. Every contact I came across in Karachi and Lahore, including many of those in Islamabad, gazed at me with dollar-signs in their eyes. To them, I was a bag of Canadian gold whose ignorance they were keen to exploit to the fullest. So much of my time and energy was spent navigating past those who might take advantage of my relative ignorance with regard to Pakistan.

Islamabad also offered a closer cultural affinity to Afghanistan as it is located westward, bordering the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, home to Pakistan's Pashto community. The Pashto are a people whose region is split between Pakistan and Afghanistan by the border that cuts right between it. In Afghanistan, the Pashtos are one of the two most prominent communities, and also boast a strong presence in Pakistan. Simulating or "faking" Pakistan for Afghanistan would best be done in or around that region, where the majority of Afghan migrants reside and where Pakistani Pashtos themselves could act as substitutes. Setting the story directly in Pakistan's Pashto region would even be a feasible alternative, since the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province is essentially the Taliban's stronghold within Pakistan -- which more satisfyingly establishes the threat that Hamid and his family face in the story. On some level I was also viscerally aware of this threat surrounding me.

Ultimately, however, when finding a purely Pashto cast proved nearly impossible, I decided to simplify the process and set the narrative in an unidentified Pakistani community, which required

that I translate the dialogue into Urdu -- Pakistan's national language. As my supervisory committee reminded me, my priority was to tell a story, without getting overly caught up in the cultural particularities, especially considering how the story is not concerned directly with local politics.

The previous summer, while conducting preliminary research for the feature script, I was invited by a Spanish NGO to visit a refugee camp in Thessaloniki, Greece. The trip was intended as an opportunity to speak with refugees about their reasons for abandoning their home and gain insight into how the journeys across borders are conducted. A group that I spent most of the time with consisted of five young Pakistani men -- two brothers and their three cousins. According to their accounts, they fled Pakistan due to family feuds over land and inheritance, which had already cost the lives of several relatives. Countless other recorded cases corroborated that Pakistan is a country in which quite frequently familial, political, religious and other similar forms of tensions can serve as the impetus behind violence that results in the necessity to flee. In fact, just weeks before my flight into Pakistan, a death sentence for a Christian girl accused of insulting Islam was overturned, which sparked violent protests and led to even her legal representatives needing to flee the country.[12] It was possible to set the story directly in Pakistan and have the inciting incident, which forces Hamid to consider placing his child up for adoption and escaping town, make practical sense. As far as my script was concerned, all I needed to do was quickly establish an imminent threat that sparks Hamid's desire/need to protect his child by giving it a new home. There was no narrative need to discuss in depth the particularities of the

[12] "Asia Bibi: Pakistan acquits Christian woman on death row," *BBC*, October 31, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46040515

threat so long as it felt real, urgent and plausible to the audience. It also had to satisfy my own demand for authenticity, which has guided me throughout the process.

Deciding on Pakistan

The summer of 2018 was quickly drawing to an end and I didn't want to further postpone the shoot. Adamant about having the short completed by spring 2019, I had to decide between shooting locally in Canada, filming in Pakistan, or abandoning the entire endeavour. The differentiating factor between the three options was the degree of risk I was willing to take. In the midst of the quandary, I had to consider which of the paths would most logically fulfill my initial objective: *to create a worthy standalone short, which could simultaneously serve as a proof-of-concept -- while remaining true to the core of my story.* That meant asking what was best for the script and looking beyond the present. Unless I would be content with something half-baked, it wouldn't be enough to merely test the characters and the narrative by producing the script in an inauthentic way. An integral element of the endeavour was precisely to explore both the creative and practical challenges that could arise from the literal realization of the screenplay. Only that could serve as the ultimate test. With that in mind, I decided to bite the bullet and, with my shoestring budget, shoot the piece completely on location, in Pakistan, with an entirely local cast and crew. It was a strategy that had very few supporters.

Having already lived in four countries with completely distinct cultures, histories and languages, provided me with an obvious advantage. Being in foreign territory was not new to me. I have travelled to more places than the average person will in their lifetime, and almost all of it I have done alone. Prior to starting the MFA program, and hungry for something fresh, I liquidated what little I had in Toronto and moved to Spain with only the first two weeks of the trip planned. A

journey that I thought would last a few months became two years of living, working, travelling and building a solid network of friends in a country where initially I didn't know a soul. Pakistan greatly differed from anything else I had experienced, but my 'worldliness' could provide me with the tools to succeed under these circumstances and return with a film in hand. That's the idea I sold to myself.

The first step was to postpone my shoot date to December to give myself more prep time but also because winter is the most optimal season to film in Pakistan. A limited budget aside, not being physically on the ground and collaborating with people I had never met in person purely over Skype complicated the process enormously. On both sides of the pond, there was a degree of mistrust that needed to be bridged, and was bridged by demonstrating a high degree of reliability and commitment to the project. Considering the currency exchange and average salary in Pakistan, my budget allowed me to offer modest financial compensation to all the cast and crew, but an even bigger incentive for them was the prospect of working on something different and "Canadian".

The number of crew members who would sign up and completely disappear off the radar within days was endless. But Ibrahim Khan (Line Producer and Casting Director), Ali Sattar (Cinematographer) and Hasan Naeem (whose production company provided us with equipment) formed a reliable backbone from which we were able to eventually launch our production. Ibrahim and Hasan were direct contacts of Shehrezade, and Ali we met through Hasan. I offered Shehrezade the role of Executive Producer for her tireless dedication in not just providing critical

guidance and advancing my work in any way she could, but for also facilitating my arrival and time in Pakistan. She conducted all her work remotely from Toronto as I didn't have the budget to bring her along to Islamabad with me. This also taught me reminded me about collaboration and openness to sharing credit when it was warranted -- and that a film is not a product of any one person.

Representation and Authorship

There were two elements pertaining to representation and authorship that concerned me. On one hand, I was thematically and narratively tackling a theme with which I had no direct personal experience; I've neither fathered children nor have I confronted the dilemma of giving up someone dear to me for fear of life. On the other hand, the characters, as well as their culture, settings, nationalities, and language -- basically, the narrative tools that I was using to tackle the subject -- were also not directly mine. I was setting my story in a country that I had never visited and whose culture I had no direct experience with. Navigating such foreign territory strongly runs the risk of producing work that's cliché, unconvincing or insensitive. I might have been relying too much on my imagination and too little on firsthand and personal experience. In the words of Pierre-August Renoir, as cited by Syd Field, "The artist who paints only what is in his mind must very soon repeat himself."[13]

The main impetus behind my decision to see the project through was its source material -- the feature script. If, within a reasonably short span of time, I had written an early draft to a feature screenplay that I considered worthy of taking seriously then there must be something binding me to the idea, even if it's in large part on a subconscious level. George Lucas created an entirely fictitious universe in space without ever having left planet earth.

As someone from an ethnic minority, especially one that receives a daily barrage of negative coverage, I constantly witness how "entertainment media exist not so much to increase our

[13] Field (2005), 7.

awareness but to confirm our suspicions."[14] Audiences can be extremely sensitive about misrepresentations and false-portrayals, particularly at the hands of someone who is not directly from the culture or social group in question -- and even more so when setting a story in underprivileged societies or communities, where the end result could be 'poverty porn' for privileged audiences. Viewers can quickly tell whether the artist knows or doesn't know what he/she is talking about, and (rightfully so) will be more critical of a work that's produced by an 'outsider'. Yet, I wouldn't argue that films should *only* be made by filmmakers who hail directly from the community represented.

As an Iranian-born, my regional proximity to Pakistani culture facilitated my understanding of many of its nuances. I made an effort to greatly inform myself about Pakistan within the given time -- not only for the benefit of my script, but equally so in order to successfully navigate production. Aside from readings and research, I surrounded myself with Pakistani contacts and frequently consulted them on the veracity of the script and its characters to the point that I felt reassured I wasn't merely "tailoring [my story] to appeal to Western audience's preconceived notions."[15] (In addition to facilitating the shoot, one of the biggest perks of working with an entirely local crew was precisely their ability to guide me as needed on cultural complexities even on set.) As a Canadian production, though with a Pakistani Executive Producer and colleague, I recognized that the majority of the film's viewers may end up being non-Pakistanis. Nonetheless, I regularly stressed to the team that we needed to approach the piece as if it were intended for Pakistani viewers. If the local audience buys into the cultural intricacies of the story

[14] Graham, Mark, *Afghanistan in the Cinema* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 96.
[15] Ibid., 65.

and its on-screen representation, then foreign viewers will logically follow suit. Above all, the most thorough way to connect with all spectators was to rely on the humanistic quality of the story. That's why the political circumstances in *Worth* are only a backdrop that establish the premise; otherwise the film concerns itself with Hamid's internal struggle. If the narrative is about the human condition, if it satisfies viewers as people, regardless of their gender, culture, political and religious affiliation, etc. it'll be internationally understood -- and any minor cultural fallacies can even be overlooked. Once again, filling every major role with Pakistanis helped ensure that any discrepancies would be minor.

In the end, I knew the best way to obtain answers to these questions was by producing the film and drawing conclusions afterwards, rather than just theorizing.

Casting

My arrival in Pakistan got off to a shaky start due to a 30-hour flight delay, but we managed to quickly recover lost time. The delay meant losing Saturday entirely, the one cushion day that was scheduled between my arrival (Friday evening) and auditions (Sunday morning). Yet I was adamant about proceeding with auditions as planned, as rescheduling our audition to a weekday session, especially on such short notice, ran the risk of us losing candidates in an already narrow pool of actors.

Throughout the preceding months we had started the casting search through social media, word of mouth and contacts. There are no official casting-call platforms in Pakistan, and I was warned against casting agents who would take the opportunity to charge lots and offer little. We requested headshots and video readings of the sides from every candidate. Barely any had acting reels, and the reels of those who did have them hardly served any purpose. I am not exaggerating in saying that the majority of Pakistanis, including the crew I was working with, had barely seen any films outside of the Bollywood context. And in a culture where good looks are taken for ‘good acting’, it was tricky to get appropriate solicitations for a project that was not concerned with glitz, dance routines and romance.

Considering the nature of the script, realist or naturalistic acting would serve as a major component of the film. Since my plan was to also refrain from the use of any music, flashy camera movements or non-diegetic tools to manipulate the audience’s emotion, and instead allow

each scene to unfold rawly, most of the dramatic weight would fall on the acting (and, by extension, the directing).

Out of the countless submissions received, we had just one or two potential candidates for every role. The Smuggler, who in the script had more on-screen time and a few lines of dialogue, would probably need to be selected from one of the rejected Hamid applicants. Casting Darya and the Khan would be especially difficult since they represent age groups for which there are typically few actors. Someone in the Khan's age-range would also not be following social media and online postings, which required us to directly approach candidates ourselves. We drew a list of 'seasoned' Paksitani actors who could be appropriate for the Khan's role and contacted them. Since the Khan was extremely pertinent to the overall narrative yet required only a single day of shooting, perhaps we could afford their rates. The strategy would be to simultaneously benefit from their experience and from having their name attached to the project, which in turn could strengthen the participation and commitment of other cast and crew who would want to be associated with a bigger name. Hameed Sheikh, Rasheed Naz, Najeebullah Anjum, Javed Babar and Rehan Sheikh were five of the established actors we approached for the role of the Khan. As for Darya, our strongest source was the private school where Ibrahim, the line producer and casting director, worked.

The auditions were straightforward due to the lack of options. Waqas was the standout choice for Hamid. Even for the standards of actors that an independent short film could attain here in Toronto, Waqas possessed the qualities that could certainly work for the role. Waqas was also a

direct contact of Ali (our cinematographer) and worked as a video editor for Hasan (whose company the production partnered with for equipment rental), which assured his reliability. Of the aforementioned names we contacted for the Khan's role, Rehan Sheikh agreed to come on board, though a few days before the shoot he pulled out. Babar, who I thought offered something interesting and wholly different from what I initially had in mind, was given the role of the Khan. Two of the girls (sisters, in fact) who I truly looked forward to audition eventually didn't show up due to their mother's reservation, which meant that Dania emerged as the sole candidate. None of the other girls who auditioned were in any way suitable. It's commonly said that when casting child actors, you're in casting fact the parents, since it's mainly they who will be on set pushing and encouraging the child to work, and keeping them committed. In addition to Dania proving herself the most suitable option, we found an incredible ally in her mother. One of Shehrezadeh's friends was cast for the role of Mahnaz, the woman behind the curtain. Ibrahim, the line-producer, would take the Smuggler's role. The baby we found through one of our fixers.

Location and Sound

While still in Canada, I got the ball rolling on locations by asking contacts to send photos and videos of potential spaces. We had the choice between setting the story in a busier, more densely populated city, or in the outskirts. The story could work in both settings; the difference was more a question of aesthetics. Although initially the script had been set in the outskirts, I had over time grown to seriously entertain the possibility of shooting it somewhere urban. Rawalpindi is a historical and bustling city immediately neighbouring Islamabad, which I thought was a very suitable option. But we didn't have the means to crowd control, which is critical in a country where throngs of people immediately surround anyone with a camera, and, more importantly, where it would be impossible to get even a millisecond of audible dialogue.

Location sound was one of the most challenging elements of the production. Pakistani productions still rely heavily on ADR for sound, but ADR devalues the quality of the acting and is considered as B-Movie audio treatment by today's audiences. Above all, I wouldn't have access to any of the actors during post-production for an ADR session to begin with. It was critical that I return to Toronto with extremely clean audio. Not a single one of the Pakistani crew members had ever been involved in a production with recorded live sound and had no idea what the process entailed. None of my Pakistani sources had leads on location recordists, so when practically the only two location recordists in the entire country fell through (one was booked and the other proved unreliable), I had no choice but to fly in a Toronto sound recordist with me.

Immediately after my arrival I visited Rawalpindi, but due to the concerns of sound and crowd control I decided to set the project in a rural territory. Sarai-Kharbuza, a village 30 minutes outside of Islamabad eventually became our primary filming destination thanks to Ibrahim and Shehrezade's leads. The actual village khan (village elder), after a five minute chat, gave us complete access to the town and within two days we had locked all the locations. All of the spots that we shot at were within close proximity from one another, facilitating unit moves. On the other end of Islamabad, in a district called Bari Imam, the landowner, in a matter of seconds, gave us access to his land for the truck scene -- and later his own 4-wheeler. Never had finding and securing locations been that easy, enjoyable -- and free. Everyone was extremely welcoming of our presence, we were never given the sense of burdening anyone. In fact, one of the great blessings of filming in Pakistan was the ease with which we were able to pull favours. There was always an incredible degree of trust, always a great willingness to help and all with very little or even no financial compensations expected.

Directing a Foreign Language

One of my biggest concerns on this project was directing actors in a language I do not understand. Due to the lack of time, I unfortunately did not find the opportunity to research and investigate this topic, so I had to rely on personal logic and impulse. Fortunately, being trilingual, in addition to some of the shared vocabulary that exists between Farsi and Urdu -- and having already directed content in 3 different languages -- facilitated the process for me. That said, the biggest loss in directing a foreign language is the inability to embrace improvisation, and I do not believe there is no way around that aside from learning and fully grasping the language at play.

I have always preferred my actors to follow the script, mainly because improvisational acting can complicate continuity during picture-edit, especially for scenes where you have a carefully coordinated sequence of shots. Improvisation is fantastic during rehearsals, out of which emerge ideas that can be included in the script in advance of filming. A child actor, however, especially one with little acting experience, would feel restrained by verbatim memorization and may find it nearly impossible to deliver memorized lines believably. In such cases, improvisation on set could truly elicit a far more naturalistic performance from child performers.

The original translation of the script from English to Urdu was done by Ibrahim Khan (line producer and casting director). The adult actors, during the first rehearsal session, were then asked to reword their lines in a way that flowed well for them, without undoing the meaning and purpose behind them. The screenplay was never dialogue heavy to begin with, except for the

baby-handoff scene between Hamid and the Khan, where few instances of important expositional dialogue meant that it was critical for certain notes to be hit at strategic moments in the scene. As a five-page scene, it was additionally important for us to establish a rhythm that would allow us to quickly get through it without it seeming rushed. The single rehearsal session we had between Dania (playing Darya) and Waqas (Hamid) was spent going over the overall motions and general blockings of their scenes. In retrospect, I wish I had conducted more improvisational exercises between Dania and Waqas, but there was very little we could manage during the allotted three hours.

Though not understanding the language of the dialogue is a massive handicap, I quickly learned during rehearsals -- and later during filming -- that it doesn't prevent a director from evaluating the acting and judging a take. What's most important is for the director to have a firm grasp of what the scene is about and what each character is fighting for, which in turn facilitates one's ability to assess the performances almost purely based on physical movements and tonalities of dialogue. My prefered takes (on set and later during the edit) were fairly consistent with those of the native Urdu speakers who assisted me. When working in a language that one does not understand, the first step is to familiarize oneself with the tonalities of a language and the common physical gestures of the culture through observation and human interactions. I had two weeks in Pakistan to do that. Behind the tonal and physical linguistics reside the emotions, which are universal and a reflection of our human condition. One can 'feel' whether a scene or snippet of acting is or is not genuine. The only thing that needs to be done after yelling *cut* is to verify whether the lines were delivered properly. (Directing a comedy in a different language, however,

is a totally different matter. The director needs to have a total grasp of the language since humour has strong cultural connotations and is unique to each individual ethnicity. I would not direct a comedy in a language in which I am not fully comfortable).

The Shoot

I scheduled equipment and crew for six days of filming but planned to have it all shot in four. At the end of day 2, it began to rain for the first time in over a month, forcing us to cancel filming on days 3 and 4. We needed to have the filming done by the end of day 6, as from then onwards equipment availability would be limited and our cinematographer would be booked. The two day additional days served as the perfect contingency, and the rain -- which at first seemed like a curse -- eventually emerged as a blessing in disguise. The rain break split the filming neatly into two halves, allowing us to recharge, further plan and rehearse before returning to film on day 5 and 6.

Day 1 was dedicated to shooting the opening scenes, as well as the final fire scene that was eventually omitted. Day 2 was designated for the scenes in which Hamid hides Darya and later, after renouncing Ali, returns to pick her up. Near the end of the day we also grabbed short scenes of them walking through the town. The third day of shooting was entirely devoted to the baby scene in the basement with the Khan, and the final day was for the scenes on the hill.

With the exception of the fire scene, which was the very last in the script, I decided to shoot all of Darya's scenes in chronological order to assist her maintain the narrative and emotional thread. Steven Spielberg filmed *E.T. the Extra Terrestrial (1982)* chronologically, citing children's difficulty to evoke the proper emotions due to their difficulty in reordering the narrative in their minds and attaining the appropriate emotion when things are presented to them

out of sequence.[16] I wasn't working on a feature production whose story builds towards an emotional goodbye scene, though I did feel the young actress playing Darya could benefit from having her scenes shot in sequence since it was her first time on a film set, and her only previous acting experience was in theatre (where the story unfolds chronologically). In comparison to the only other film for which I directed a child actor, this time to my surprise less effort was needed to mentally anchor the child in the correct point of the narrative -- perhaps because it was filmed chronologically.

A script that could have been shot comfortably within four 12-hour days went overtime every single day. It was immediately evident that the level of on-set experience was considerably below what I had been accustomed to in Toronto, but that's not to say they didn't give it their all. Shehrezade had warned me at length about the slowness with which work is conducted in Pakistan, and my objective was never to impose my methodology onto an entirely local crew, but rather to embrace their style and work with it. James' (the location sound recordist who accompanied me from Toronto) presence became a true blessing. On a set where I had to personally check everyone's work practically every step of the way, it was a relief to know that at least the sound was taken care of. James also facilitated the slating for sync recording, an experience that was a first for all the local crew. It was also emotionally helpful to have around someone who spoke my language, figuratively speaking. Knowing that there would be no opportunity for any pickups or reshoots, I can state with little exaggeration that nearly half my energy on set and that of James was devoted to push the shoot forward and get what was needed.

[16] *The Making of 'E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial'*, directed by Laurent Bouzereau, (1996), YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m27c9gDSmvs

By the end, we just about got everything that had been planned and I wouldn't be returning home empty handed.

Working With an Editor

What I most looked forward to during post-production was collaborating with an editor for the first time. Up until *Worth*, I had personally edited every piece I had directed. For someone who strongly takes into consideration the sequence of shots right from the scriptwriting phase and meticulously shot-lists accordingly, I have regarded myself as an 'editor-inclined' filmmaker. Perhaps this explains why I tend to complete the editing-phase relatively fast. Assuming that I have achieved the shots I sought on set, the picture edit becomes a process of selecting the takes, ordering them as initially planned, and tightening them. Of course, certain scenes need to be approached differently than initially envisioned, but I have so far never found it necessary to rewrite or restructure any of my films in the edit suite. If the script is where you want it to be before going to camera, and you execute the script on set, most of the work is done by the time you enter post-production. Since I've always abided by that philosophy, I have found it faster and more convenient to do the editing myself. But I recognized that, sooner or later, working with an editor was a practice I had to explore in order to further my filmmaking skills, and decided to exercise it on this project.

Daniel Montiel and I met years earlier when editing a TV show together. Since then, we had forged a very close friendship, and knowing how delicate the edit phase is, I would only be comfortable handing off the footage to someone I could fully trust. Since Daniel was volunteering his free time to work on the piece, we agreed that I would jump into the editor's seat whenever he couldn't attend a scheduled session.

Ironically, despite the fact that I myself had worked as an editor for years and understood how editors prefer to receive direction, I struggled to communicate my thoughts to Daniel. I have rarely faced great difficulty in conveying ideas to other crew members, but could not replicate the same dynamic with Daniel. My gut impulse to every adjustment was to take the wheel and apply the tweaks myself, which can be very demoralising for the editor. (Thankfully I restrained myself from doing so, unless it was a last resort). Personally possessing the technical knowledge to implement changes without having to depend on an editor has weakened my communication skills in that regard.

The biggest question lingering over my head was how physically involved or present a director should be during the edit. A great deal of time, particularly early on, was spent discussing with Daniel the nature of our dynamic. I could only scratch the surface of the editor-director relationship due to the project's limited timeframe, but the experience still yielded interesting points for consideration. I still can't say with certainty how I ought to conduct the editing phase on future projects, but based on the experience on *Worth*, I think I would be most productive in at least a co-editing capacity. It's great to have an editor who can offer additional insight and split responsibilities, but I feel too strongly about how the shots should be organized, enjoy the editing process too much, and regard it too intertwined in my filmmaking process to relinquish it over entirely to someone else.

Locking Picture

Since we managed to film the scenes as scripted and shot-listed, we proceeded to edit the piece without any substantial hiccups, and did not require any restructuring. For the dialogue scenes, I depended on Shehrezade to help me select the right takes. In one of the scenes with Darya, where the dialogue was more improvised and blocking slightly inconsistent between takes, we had to stitch the scene together through different angles, yet the result is thankfully quite seamless.

For the first cut, we included all the scenes in their entirety, as scripted, to accurately assess how wide the story could stretch. It ran for nearly 20 minutes. The story was clear -- *too* clear. In subsequent drafts we tightened the pacing and eliminated any excess and redundancies. I was keen to make the film as lean and as short as possible, and I still feel that one of the accomplishments of the piece is that it manages to tell a fairly large story quite efficiently within a short period of time.

With great help from my supervisory committee, we slashed every line of dialogue not absolutely pertinent in the baby scene with the Khan. Roughly 2 minutes were left on the cutting-room floor. (The scene still runs a bit long, but as far as the dialogue and action is concerned, I don't think there is any way of cutting it down further without losing important elements.) As for the fire scene at the end, although I felt better about it after seeing it on screen, it was clear that it needed to be lifted for the reasons mentioned earlier.

Otherwise, it was the truck scene on the hilltop with the Smuggler that initiated the most rounds of revisions. Initially, the Smuggler would get out of the truck, walk over to Hamid and ask him a couple of questions before returning to his vehicle and driving off, leaving Hamid and Darya alone on the empty road. Below is an excerpt showing the scene as initially scripted.

EXT. REMOTE GRAVEL ROAD - MOMENTS LATER

Hamid and Darya inch closer in our direction. Hamid slows down, seeing something OS. We PAN with him as he takes a couple final steps passed us.

REVEAL - a 4-by-4 truck parked with its rear toward us. The truck's engine starts RUNNING.

Hamid gathers himself. He glances down at Darya, she returns the look, not understanding.

The passenger door POPS opens and a SMUGGLER (50s) steps out. He stretches his neck and adjusts his waistband, monitoring them out of the corner of his eyes.

Hamid nudges Darya closer to him.

The Smuggler strolls over to Hamid and Darya. Hands in his coat pockets, he studies them top to bottom.

SMUGGLER
There a problem?

Hamid struggles to form a response. Darya watches him in anticipation.

The Smuggler checks around in all directions. He leans forward.

SMUGGLER
Summin' you wanna ask me?

Hamid swallows. Darya slips her hand into her father's. He looks down at her, they trade looks for a long beat.

SMUGGLER
Hey, look at me.
(beat)
Got summin' to ask, I said?

Hamid grips Darya's hand tighter.

HAMID
No...

The Smuggler registers confusion. With unblinking eyes, he stares down at Darya, then back up at Hamid.

SMUGGLER
Nothing?

Hamid remains firm.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! - The Smuggler raises his arm to switch off watch but pauses to offer Hamid an extra moment.

Hamid shifts his eyes again toward Darya.

The Smuggler presses the the alarm off. Returns toward the truck.

Hamid's eyes stay pinned to the ground as the truck's ENGINE ROARS off-screen. We hear it DRIVE AWAY.

A stretch of SILENCE ensues. Hamid lifts his head.

Empty road.

Hamid kneels in front of Darya. Wipes the hair from her sweaty face. Gazes intently at her. Kisses her forehead. Presses her head against his chest.

A soft BREEZE passes.

Howard Wiseman's earliest feedback not only addressed the core issue of the hilltop scene, but also served as a guiding point for the entire editing process: to "sense the emotion of the characters, story, and where the audience is emotionally moment to moment, scene to scene"

without falling so “behind us that we start getting ahead of you.” Halfway into the hilltop scene the audience already understood that Hamid would not get on the truck; anything coming afterwards would therefore be redundant and place the audience ahead of the film. Seeing the Smuggler return to his vehicle and drive off -- in other words, confirming to the audience that Hamid does not go ahead with the plan -- renders the scene afterwards (Hamid at the Khan’s door with the cash of envelope) unnecessary. If Hamid chooses to forgo a ride it is only logical he does so with the intention of returning for his child, especially considering everything else that has unfolded leading up to that moment. The solution became to have the hilltop and final scenes function as one entity or movement. The first half of the movement (hilltop) addresses Hamid’s hesitation while the latter half (Khan’s door) confirms that he chooses to come back for his baby.

Tereza Barta’s suggestion from the first cut was to end the hilltop scene right before the Smuggler gets out of the truck. The Smuggler, Tereza argued, is not a fully fleshed out character. He has no relationship with the protagonist and merely serves as a visual embodiment of the path that Hamid will or will not pursue. The Smuggler’s conversation with Hamid does not offer anything beyond what is already suggested by Hamid gazing at the truck. It would make the most narrative sense to cut directly from Hamid looking at the truck to him back at the Khan’s door -- and we still wouldn’t lose anything.

As much as I liked Tereza’s suggestion in theory, I was upset that the idea had not occurred to us before the shoot. Technically speaking, I possessed the necessary shots -- the visual syntax -- to

cheat this approach through basic Kuleshov effect montage, but my reticence came from knowing that the scene's emotions, the drama, the suspense would not manifest as I would have liked. In a scene without dialogue, especially one at the height of the narrative, the camera angles are crucial since they can rather enrich or depreciate the visual vocabulary. My camera angles for that segment, originally framed as shot reverse-shots, meant they could not offer the maximum emotional impact. The close-ups of Hamid and Darya looking at the truck in the final version were in fact of them standing face-to-face with the Smuggler. I had to carefully fish for moments of usable expressions to give the impression that it was the truck he was gazing at since the acting also was not performed with that plot-line in mind. We also had to slightly slow down the long-shot of the Smuggler in his truck to gain an additional beat.

Keen to explore other alternatives, I tested by ending the scene midway through their conversation -- a beat after the Smuggler says *Do you have something to ask?* It certainly worked, and was an improvement from the first draft, but even that could be unnecessary. So I test screened it.

There was resistance to not have the Smuggler approach Hamid from test audiences. Many argued the Smuggler approaching Hamid appropriately reinforced Hamid's emotional state and elevated the drama. By the end, the test screenings provided nearly an equal split in preference between the two approaches. The polarised feedback seemed to affirm doubts about whether the average spectator feels the scene offers enough if the Smuggler stays in his car -- and I mainly attributed that to editing the footage slightly out of their intended context.

In the end, one of the main factors leading me to keep the Smuggler in the car was because -- out of the test viewers -- most of those who were parents felt it was clear enough that way. It was important to consider the opinions of those who can personally relate to the protagonist's inner struggle. They could best assess the piece's treatment of such a theme. And as much as I was still caught up over the fact that the acting and angling wasn't 100% the way I would have preferred, it narratively made the most sense since it discarded the most amount of excess fat.

Conclusion

Worth became a project of many important firsts. The first time adapting a script from a long format into a short one; the first time mounting an entire production in a country that I had never stepped foot in; the first time directing in a language I didn't speak; the first time collaborating with an editor; even the first time shooting entirely hand-held. Ironically, a non-experimental film involved an ocean of experimentation. With every piece, I feel the urge to tackle new experiences, no matter how light or heavy these experiences may be. Yet the end result is almost as thematically similar to my previous work as all of my pieces are stylistically different from one another.

Perhaps those more personally affiliated with the film's themes and subject matter can better assess my treatment of them. The process forced me to directly confront certain questions of ethics in filmmaking and develop the tools to deal with them. But being mindful and honest about one's shortcomings every step of the way can lead to learning and overcoming them.

As for the storytelling, which is the ultimate yardstick for a director, I feel the piece quite effectively fulfills -- by embodying the various cinematic traits I consider important in filmmaking -- the initial objectives I sought to pursue. *Worth* instantly plunges the audience into the thick of the narrative and continuously raises the tension, while keeping the story's main emotional beat always front and center. "The director who, through the simplicity and clarity of his work, is the most accessible to a universal audience is also the director who excels at filming

the most complex and subtle relationships between human beings," says Francois Truffaut.[17] Honing my understanding of the cinematic vocabulary from project to project hopefully can take me closer to the level of filmmaking I'd like to eventually practice. *Worth* certainly provided me with a slew of invaluable lessons.

After having privately screened it with audiences in 3 different continents, I have concluded that *Worth*'s main achievement -- despite its imperfections -- is its ability to engage viewers equally across the board. In the words of Hitchcock, "If you've designed a picture correctly, in terms of its emotional impact, the Japanese audience should scream at the same time as the Indian audience. To a filmmaker, this is always the challenge."[18]

[17] Truffaut, Francois, *Hitchcock/Truffaut*, (New York, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 12.
[18] Ibid., 242.

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